Activist Profile: Um Sophy

The gate in front of Um Sophy’s home in Lor Peang village, Kampong Chhnang province, is covered with posters and brightly colored flags. Some carry slogans calling for respect for human rights, while others represent Buddhism, the national flags of Cambodia, foreign countries and the United Nations. They show just some of the places she and other members of her community have turned to for help in their long running land dispute with KDC International (“KDC”), a company owned by Mrs. Chea Kheng, wife of the Minister of Mines and Energy Mr. Suy Sem.

Local residents have lived in Lor Peang since as long ago as 1982. Um Sophy moved to Lor Peang in 2004 when she married her husband, Sngoun Nhoeun, who had been living there since 1993. For several years, she has been at the forefront of the local community’s efforts to stop the acquisition of their land by KDC, and has suffered harsh consequences as a result.

Tensions began in 1996, when local villagers were first pressured to sell land. At that time, the village chief told them that if they were willing to sell, they would receive money, but if they were not, they would simply lose the land without compensation. Some families agreed to sell, while others refused. In 2001, rumors began circulating that a wealthy businessman from Phnom Penh was behind the land purchase, but local residents remained unaware of who was interested in buying the land and for what purpose. The conflict became much more serious from 2006, when KDC representatives visited the area and it became clear that the company was attempting to acquire land, and villagers who had previously refused to sell were prevented from farming their land.

In 2006, KDC workers accompanied by local police officers dug a ditch around the disputed land in Lor Peang despite opposition from the villagers. The land in dispute was mostly agricultural land, but also included 14 houses. In 2007, KDC filed a complaint against the occupiers of the 14 houses for illegally occupying land belonging to the company, and on 9 January 2008, KDC workers destroyed the houses and surrounding farm land with bulldozers, without any prior warning or notification. Luckily, none of the occupants were injured, but many possessions were destroyed. One of the houses and some of the farmland that was destroyed belonged to Um Sophy. She was living there at the time and grew mango, rice, jackfruit and coconuts, to supplement her income as a teacher.

Because of her role in leading members of her community to protest the land grabs, Um Sophy was interrogated at the provincial court under accusations of incitement. Her case was transferred to a court in Phnom Penh, and fearing arrest, she fled to Thailand, not returning to Cambodia until December 2011. When she came back, she received unofficial warnings from her relatives not to engage in protests, or she would be arrested. Subsequently, an anonymous letter threatening her and her husband was posted on the wall of their house, saying that if she protested, she would be arrested or killed. A picture of a gun had been drawn on the letter. Despite the risk, she continued to do just that, taking the letter to Kampong Chhnang Provincial Court and filing a complaint. No perpetrators have been identified, but the District Inspector of Police called Sophy for questioning to investigate.
Beginning in April 2014, some of the affected families were called to attend a series of meetings with KDC, to negotiate compensation deals directly with KDC owner Mrs. Chea Kheng at the local district office, accompanied by local officials and NGO representatives. However, most of the families felt that the compensation being offered was far too low, and very few of the affected families accepted a deal. The families complained that they were not able to negotiate as a group, but instead were forced to discuss their claims on a case-by-case basis, undermining their bargaining position. Furthermore, one villager told CCHR that a group of them were forced to accept what they considered to be inadequate compensation under threat of legal action, which they later challenged in court.

The dispute in Lor Peang has erupted into violence several times, particularly after workers hired by KDC began constructing a concrete wall around the disputed land in April 2014. Clashes occurred on 7 July as villagers tried to prevent KDC workers putting up temporary tents on the disputed land. Clashes again broke out the following day, as villagers prevented police and gendarmerie officers from arresting Um Sophy on charges of incitement.

Amid the rise in confrontations, the villagers held a press conference on 17 July 2014 at Um Sophy’s house where they invited journalists and NGOs to hear their stories of the violence of the previous days. The villagers say that at around noon, KDC workers began throwing stones at the house, provoking them to respond in kind. Both sides used sling shots to attack each other and several people were hurt in the standoff that lasted several hours.

Several days later, two men were arrested as they left a meeting at Um Sophy’s house on charges of damaging property, and on 5 August, a group of villagers led a protest march and camped in front of the provincial court to demand their release. On 7 August 2014, the villagers tried to file a petition with the Provincial Governor, leading to more violent scuffles between protestors and the police before the petition was received.

Deciding to take their complaint to the national level, the villagers began a march to Phnom Penh on 12 August 2014, but were blocked and violently dispersed by police officers. Several villagers were injured, and Um Sophy’s husband, Sngoun Nhoeun, was arrested along with two other villagers. Sngoun Nhoeun says that he was beaten during his arrest. Despite the obstacles, Um Sophy continued to lead the march to Phnom Penh, demanding a resolution of the dispute and the release of her husband and his fellow villagers; they were released on 29 September 2014.

Despite reported assurances from the National Assembly’s Human Rights Commission that it would work to bring a quick resolution to the dispute, and a visit to the area by Commission member Chea Poch in January 2015, it remains unresolved. When CCHR asked Um Sophy if she had a public message for the authorities, she said that her biggest concern was for her children’s future: “look at the suffering of people affected by land disputes, how can we support our livelihoods? Especially for our children.”